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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KMPI](#) [KDEM](#) [BA](#) [POL](#) [REFORM](#) [HUMRIT](#)
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT COMMITTEES WARN NEWSPAPERS ABOUT
ANTI-REGIME COVERAGE

REF: MANAMA 0907

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Several Embassy media contacts have told Emboffs that the government recently formed two committees designed to monitor the content of print and broadcast media in Bahrain. The chairman of the board of the independent daily Al Wasat received a letter from one of the committees complaining about specific articles written by three of its reporters that, according to the letter, contain statements that "could be viewed as anti-regime." The editors-in-chief of the six Arabic dailies were called in for a meeting June 6 with chair of the Technical Media Committee (and CEO of the Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation, BRTC) Shaikh Khalifa bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, who warned that the government could pull advertising of publicly owned corporations from papers publishing anti-regime articles and commentaries. One contact confirmed the initiative but said the aim is to improve the professionalism of newspaper reporting, which often resorts to unfounded attacks. Columnist and talk-show host Sawsan Al Shaer quit her television program after segments of a recent program that were critical of parliament were edited out of the broadcast version.

12. (C) Summary continued: Minister of Information Abdul Ghaffar told the Ambassador June 21 there was no government policy to control the media and that freedom of the press is an integral part of the King's reform effort. He denied there was an intention to withhold government-related advertising from critical newspapers but admitted individual ministers might choose to steer some advertising away from certain papers. In our view, these developments indicate increasing government concern about media content during this period in the run-up to parliamentary and municipal elections, expected in November 2006. Increased monitoring of anti-regime coverage may signal an intent to assert some measure of government control over the media or, at a minimum, encourage greater self-censorship. End Summary.

Government Committees to Monitor Media Content

13. (C) Two editors-in-chief and several other media contacts reported to APAO that Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Shaikh Ahmed Attiyatallah Al Khalifa established two media watch committees under the auspices of his office. (See refTel for Shaikh Ahmed's political activities.) The Higher Media Committee and the Technical Media Committee, they say, aim to monitor the content of print and broadcast media in Bahrain with specific focus on anti-government reporting and commentary. Shaikh Ahmed named himself head of the Higher Media Committee and designated Shaikh Khalifa bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, CEO of BRTC to chair the Technical Media Committee. Close embassy contacts in the Ministry of Information say they have no knowledge of the formation of these committees, maintaining that any official instructions to publications or broadcasters in Bahrain must come from the Ministry of Information, not from Cabinet Affairs.

"What is the Extent of Press Freedom?"

14. (C) In the name of the Technical Media Committee, Shaikh Khalifa sent a letter on May 9 to Farooq Al Moayyed, chair of the Al Wasat newspaper board of directors, taking aim at commentaries by three of the paper's most influential columnists, Reem Khalifa, Adel Marzooq, and Qassim Hussain. As described by Reem Khalifa, the letter cited by title and date specific pieces they had written which, the letter said, "carry statements that, reading between the lines, could be viewed as anti-regime." The letter indicated that these pieces had crossed the line, asking, "How far does freedom of

the press go with these columnists?" Shaikh Khalifa called on Al Wasat to come to agreement with the Technical Media Committee on "what is the ceiling of freedom."

Loss of Advertising Threatened

15. (C) Also acting in his capacity as chair of the Technical Media Committee, Shaikh Khalifa called a June 6 private meeting of the editors-in-chief of the six Arabic daily newspapers in Bahrain in which he cautioned the editors about their editorial policies. As Al Wasat editor-in-chief QMansoor Al Jamry recounted to APAO, Khalifa said statements in the press that could even indirectly be viewed as anti-regime, are not acceptable. Publishing articles or commentaries about subjects that the Committee deems off-limits would result in the paper losing advertising placements from goveQurces. Shaikh KhaliQ also threatened that the Committee would divert the flow of advertising for state-owned corporations such as Bapco, Batelco, and Alba away from offending publications.

16. (C) Al Jamry recounted that editors of all publications except Al Watan, which is rumored to be close to the Royal Court, vocally objected to the plan in the meeting. According to Al Jamry, Isa Al Shaiji Editor of the centrist Al Ayam and President of the Bahrain Journalists Association, told Shaikh Khalifa, "If we apply your rule we will have nothing but empty pages in our newspapers." In the discussion, Ebrahim Beshmi, editor of the new liberal newspaper Al Waqt, said, "Whoever makes this proposal doesn't love Bahrain and doesn't love Bahrainis." Al Jamry said he warned, "Try to do this; the plan will collapse on itself." In the face of this criticism, Shaikh Khalifa said the Committee was still in the process of establishing criteria for when the penalties would be put into effect, and the matter warranted further discussion with the editors. However, he intimated the Prime Minister was very interested in seeing the plan carried out.

No Change in Course, For Now

17. (C) Privately, several editors-in-chief have indicated they will defy the warning. In a meeting with the Ambassador, Al Waqt editor Beshmi said, "Any statements or rules should be discussed with the newspapers and implemented by the Ministry of Information," and that so far "there have been no official instructions to newspapers." Isa Al Shaiji, Editor of Al Ayam, and Younis Ali Faraj, Managing Director of the Bahrain Tribune, Al Ayam's English-language sister-paper, echoed these sentiments in a meeting with APAO, saying that until there were official rules circulated they would continue along their present course and the publications "would not be turned into a propaganda tool of the government." Al Faraj said the Bahrain Tribune advertising staff had begun monitoring government-related advertising in several publications to identify variations in placement patterns.

18. (U) The most outspoken of the editors, Al Wasat's Al Jamry, published two editorials that addressed the issue of press freedom without citing the meeting or moves by Cabinet Affairs directly. On June 7 he commended the government with faint praise saying the government "accepts accountability and oversight (from the Parliament and the press) by not using its authority to undermine them." He commented, "Good governance means not having to fear an environment of transparency." In his June 10 editorial he ties press freedoms to King Hamad's reforms. He draws an analogy between the American and Bahraini press, providing examples of how the press "saved" American society by "allowing" the US government to correct its mistakes. He calls on Bahraini government officials to follow the American example and, "realize that it is in fact in the interest of Bahrain to support the King in the current movement towards greater freedom of the press."

An Alternative Interpretation

19. (C) Not all of those in the Bahraini media take such a dim view of the motives of the Higher and Technical Media Committees. In a conversation with Pol/Econ Chief, Yousif Mashaal, Bahraini entrepreneur and occasional columnist for Al Watan, favorably offered that the focus of the committees is to provide a much needed review of journalistic professionalism in Bahrain, not to stifle criticism of the government. While US papers are attuned to the need for balance and proper sourcing in their coverage, he said, Bahraini journalists frequently attack the government and others with stories that lack facts, logical analysis, or do

not provide a balanced presentation of the issue. The goal of the Committees, in his view, is to improve journalistic standards. Additionally, not all of the editors opposed the plan outlined by Shaikh Khalifa in the June 6 meeting with editors-in-chief. According to Al Wasat's Al Jamry, Al Watan editor Mohammed Al Banki remained silent throughout the meeting. Anwar Abdul Rahman, editor of the Arab nationalist Akhbar Al Khaleej started the meeting with skeptical sentiments, but concluded by saying the plan could encourage newspapers to help their journalists "see the right path" in

their reporting.

TV Talk Host Quits After Program Edited

¶10. (C) In the only public development in this series of events, prominent columnist and television talk-show host Sawsan Al Shaer quit her show "Final Word" after two segments critical of Parliament were cut from the June 9 program at the direction of Cabinet Affairs Minister Shaikh Ahmed bin Attiyatallah. In that show Al Shaer interviewed Afaf Al Jamry, a political activist, member of leading Shia opposition society Al Wefaq, and cousin of Al Wasat Editor Mansoor Al Jamry. In one of the segments that was cut, a critical Al Jamry says that Members of Parliament were wasting time debating unimportant proposals such as allowing members of the Bahrain Defense Force to grow their beards when pressing issues such as unemployment, the lack of affordable housing, education reform, and poverty needed to be addressed. As a columnist for Al Watan, Al Shaer addressed what she deemed the "censorship" of her TV program in a piece intended for publication on June 14. However, Al Watan refused to publish it. Al Shaer's resignation and her views of the editing of her program were picked up as a news item in Al Ayam, Al Wasat, and Al Waqt. In the articles, Al Shaer recounts that an unnamed BRTC censor told her after the show's airing that Bahrain TV is a government station and cannot allow content when it is not approved by the government. Al Shaer is quoted, "There are government officials that have not been able to adjust to the era of reforms within a constitutional state." She called on BRTC to comply with the spirit of King Hamad's political reforms.

Ambassador Discusses Issue with Information Minister

¶11. (C) In a June 21 meeting with Minister of Information Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar, the Ambassador raised the reported meeting with editors-in-chief and Al Shaer's resignation, expressing his concern that these developments might indicate government interest in asserting some measure of control over the media. The Ambassador noted that one of the strengths of Bahrain's reform effort has been the diverse and increasingly lively print media, and hoped this development would not be jeopardized.

¶12. (C) Abdul Ghaffar replied that there was no government policy to control the press. King Hamad has made clear that freedom of the press is an integral part of Bahrain's reform effort. He said he was not in Bahrain when the incident with Al Shaer occurred, saying he was surprised she had quit abruptly without talking to him or BRTC CEO Shaikh Khalifa about her concerns. He noted that Al Shaer's guest had criticized Parliament, not the government, and conjectured that the censor who cut segments of the program personally believed that Bahrainis should be proud of Parliament and that the guest's comments went too far. The four-minute cut happened, but it was not government policy. Abdul Ghaffar questioned Al Shaer's motives, indicating she should have talked with him about her concerns before quitting. He said the show had not been doing well and had not attracted a lot of commercial advertising, and wondered if Al Shaer had done this to generate publicity and give her newspaper column a boost.

No Plan to Withhold Advertising

¶13. (C) Turning to the print media, Abdul Ghaffar said he did not think it was the intention of the government to withhold advertising from newspapers. In fact, he stated, the government had placed ads in Bahraini papers recently following the announcement of an agreement to develop a Bahrain-Qatar causeway, as a way to support the papers. However, it was possible, he admitted, that individual

ministers might decide to direct advertising for entities under their authority away from publications that attack them.

¶14. (C) Echoing Mashaal's words, Abdul Ghaffar said there was an important distinction between positive (constructive) and negative criticism. He said he is criticized all the time, more than any other minister. When criticizing the government, the journalist should not give false information and should not attack a minister just because the journalist does not like him/her. The criticism should be done in a balanced way.

Comment

¶15. (C) The formation of the monitoring committees is a worrying indication that the government may attempt to assert some control over the media during this sensitive period leading up to parliamentary and municipal elections, expected in November 2006. That said, the press is willing to take on a very broad range of issues, including those related to government performance and the royal family, with very few red lines. While the increased government monitoring of media content could encourage greater self-censorship in editorials and commentaries, the press will continue to cover the public comments of parliamentarians, who regularly

criticize government policies and individual ministers. These blasts out of Parliament will likely intensify after the elections, which is expected to result in the presence of more opposition MPs in the lower chamber. An unfortunate consequence of greater government monitoring of media content is that efforts to promote increased editorial independence at Bahrain Radio and Television, an initiative supported by the MEPI-funded CHUM project, will not be activated anytime soon.

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